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STAT CONGRESS SAID EXPECTED TO MOVE AGGRESSIVELY ON COVERT ACTION
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WASHINGTON

A reported secret White House plan to trade arms for hostages will cause lawmakers to more aggressively oversee U.S. covert activities when Congress reconvenes in January, a senior member of the House Intelligence Committee said today.

STAT In a telephone interview, Rep. Dave McCurdy said, "There's too much of a pattern lately ... a penchant for covert activities and also for avoiding congressional oversight."

"I think Congress will put its foot down," the Oklahoma Democrat told Reuters, adding "the most stupid thing I've ever seen (the administration) do is trade arms for hostages."

"We're not going to be able to tell our foreign policy from the French," he said.

McCurdy, who some think may have a long-shot chance to be the next intelligence committee chairman, also said he believed the White House-based National Security Council "crossed the line" if, as reported, it carried out the plan, which was designed to rescue kidnapped Americans from their captors in Lebanon.

Published reports have said the secret plan involved exchanging vital spare parts for Iran's American-built war machine for the release of hostages.

The United States repeatedly has stressed its neutrality in the six-year-old Persian Gulf War between Iraq and Iran and has pressed other countries not to supply arms or spare military parts to Iran. It also has proclaimed a policy of refusing to negotiate with "terrorist" hostage-takers.

The news reports have suggested President Reagan used the NSC for the task largely because it was an executive body exempt from congressional oversight.

However, McCurdy said "if the NSC is going to fall under the cloak of executive privilege then they cannot be an implementer of policy ... they are merely advisers to the president."

"But if they become implementers, they fall in the same category as the State Department, the CIA and all the intelligence community and are under congressional oversight," he said.

"I think they crossed the line," he said.

The House Intelligence Committee is trying to arrange for an administration briefing on the arms-for-hostages affair within the next week to ten days, according to McCurdy and the panel's staff director.

But because Congress has adjourned and many key lawmakers are either on vacation or out of the country on official trips following the November election, serious legislative scrutiny is not expected to get underway until January.

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Also at that time, Democrats will take control of the Senate from Reagan's Republican Party.

"I think at the first of the year you will see the fur fly on this," McCurdy said.

A spokesman for Sen. Richard Lugar, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said the Indiana Republican had no plans for the committee to meet on the issue, in large part because "it was our understanding you can't have an official hearing unless Congress is in session."

Spokesman Mark Helmke said Lugar was not condemning the White House plan outright because he "believes operations like this may be effective and probably should be closely held."

But he said Lugar "does have questions about how this fits into our overall Middle East efforts."